

Modern World History Online

Nigeria, post-independence

Nigeria is a West African country located on the Gulf of Guinea and bounded by Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and the Republic of Benin. Covering some 356,700 square miles (923,900 sq km), Nigeria is not the largest country in Africa, but it is its most populous. In fact, Nigeria's 175 million people account for about one-sixth of the continent's population. The people of Nigeria have long shaped trends across the region and the continent, presenting the country with the opportunities and challenges that accompany a long historical legacy of political, ethnic, and religious complexity.

The territorial boundaries of modern-day Nigeria took shape in 1914, when Britain united the separate colony of Nigeria and protectorate of Nigeria, dividing the area into the north, south, and Lagos colonies. The north was predominantly Hausa-Fulani and Muslim; the south was largely Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the east, with a growing number of Christian converts. The resulting entity was large, diverse, and difficult to manage.

Nigeria gained its independence in October 1960 with a constitution that made it an ethnically based federation. Its three original regions—Northern, Western, and Eastern—reflected the three largest ethnic groups. The system of rule was parliamentary, with the central government's powers limited to defense and security, foreign relations, and commercial and fiscal policies. Regions retained most powers of domestic governance.

The country that Nigerians inherited from the British was marked by ethnic, regional, and religious tensions. Large disparities in wealth existed between south and north, and the people who made up Nigeria's roughly 400 smaller ethnic groups were almost completely excluded from political and economic power.

Governmental Instability and Military Rule

After independence the new parliamentary democracy and the constitution that formed it were short-lived. On January 15, 1966, a group of Igbo army officers led by Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi (1924–1966) executed a successful coup d'état, assassinating the British-installed prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1912–1966), and establishing a military government.

The new government was determined to centralize power, and it also was determined to maintain its hold on the oil-rich Eastern Region. This worsened existing ethnic tensions, fomenting a strong anti-Igbo sentiment among Nigeria's other regions and ethnic groups. As a result, in July of the same year a second coup overthrew the government, assassinating Aguiyi-Ironsi and putting in power Gen. Yakubu Gowon (1934–), a leader from the northern Hausa ethnic group. Bloody ethnic violence ensued in which tens of thousands of Igbos were slaughtered. In addition thousands of Igbos who had migrated to the Northern Region were forced back to their southern homelands. Ultimately, Igbo nationalism grew, and Colonel Emeka Ojukwu (1933–2011) began an Igbo secessionist movement.

Gowon attempted to forge a federalist compromise through the creation of 12 semiautonomous states. Ojukwu saw this as a ploy, however, and in May 1967 he declared an independent Republic of Biafra in the eastern part of Nigeria. After three years of brutal civil war, the Biafra secessionists were defeated, and the central government once again had control of the east. Almost 100,000 Biafran soldiers and an estimated 500,000 to 2 million civilians died, primarily due to conflict-related starvation. The war also had social effects: a rise in ethnic animosities, a widening divide between northern and southern Nigerians, and increased tensions between the country's various religious groups. Minorities, who represented 20 to 25 percent of the population, were also victims of the conflict, and they began expressing their own discontent.

After the end of the civil war Nigeria's political life continued to be marked by ethnic and religious tensions and governmental turnovers. Gowon ruled until 1975, when a bloodless coup brought Murtala Muhammad (1938–1976) to power. A year later, when Murtala Muhammad was killed in a thwarted coup attempt, the Supreme Military Council turned to the army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (ca. 1937–). Although he was a Yoruba, Obasanjo's military background and close ties to Murtala Muhammad gave him support in the north. In 1979 Obasanjo fulfilled a pledge to reestablish civilian rule, and Shehu Shagari (1924–) became the president of the Nigerian Second Republic. In 1983, however, Shagari was overthrown by Muhammadu

Buhari (1942–), who ruled until he was overthrown by Maj.-Gen. Ibrahim Babangida (1941–) in 1985.

Babangida ruled with an iron fist until 1993. At that time, even though he had allowed for a general election to be held on June 12, 1993, he annulled what international observers generally viewed as a free and fair voting process. Amid a storm of protest, Babangida appointed Ernest Shonekan (1936–) to run a transitional, or temporary, government, with Gen. Sani Abacha (1943–1998) as vice chairman. This set off protests from supporters of Mashood Abiola (1937–1998), the reputed victor in the elections. On November 17, 1993, Abacha deposed Shonekan, dissolving the legislature and putting power once again in the hands of the military. Abiola's efforts to declare himself the legitimate ruler of Nigeria led Abacha to arrest him for treason. Ultimately, in June 1994 Abiola was put in prison, where he remained until his death in 1998.

The Abacha years were among the most brutal and corrupt in Nigeria's history. A Hausa and a Muslim, Abacha ruled with ultimate authority, continuing the domination of the northern groups over the rest of Nigeria. This had the effect of worsening the ever-present ethnic and religious divisions among the three major ethnic groups. It also increased tensions among Nigeria's many smaller ethnic groups, especially among the Ijo and Ogoni in the Niger Delta, who were outraged at Abacha's tight control of the profits from the exploitation of oil and other natural resources in their region.

Although Abacha promised the international community a transition to civilian rule, he had taken only token steps toward this when he died suddenly in June 1998. Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar (1943–) took power, marshalling support for a democratic election in 1999. Obasanjo, a strong favorite in the Western Region, came to power once again, this time as a democratically elected, civilian leader. He was reelected in 2003, with 62 percent of the vote.

The Return of Democracy

With Obasanjo's new democracy came a new constitution. Based on an American model, it calls for a legislature with two separate houses as well as a strong executive branch. The judiciary branch is fairly independent, and the legislature is active, although Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party dominated it following his elections. Critically, Nigeria remains a federal system, but now with 36 states. The autonomy of the states is intended to reduce regionalized tensions.

Nigeria is currently undergoing its longest period of civilian rule since independence. Although elections continue to be marred by irregularities and violence, in 2007 the country experienced its first transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another. Obasanjo was succeeded in 2007 by the governor of the northern Katsina state, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (1951–2010). Yar'Adua, who was credited with establishing banking reforms and securing a cease-fire in the Niger Delta, fell ill in 2010 and his vice president, Goodluck Jonathan (1957–), became acting president. Jonathan, a member of the Ijo community, won the 2011 presidential elections, considered the most transparent in the country's history, apparently with support from both the northern and southern states.

Ethnic Conflicts and Oil

In spite of the presence of a democratically elected government since 1999, ethnicity in Nigeria remains as divisive an issue as ever. Obasanjo had the advantage of being a Yoruba who had backing from the Northern Region. But he was hard-pressed to win Igbo support. Even more important, his administration ultimately heightened, rather than reduced, tensions with minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta. In large part this is because the delta region—which is home to much of Nigeria's oil industry as well as to many of its ethnic minorities—has continued to remain mired in poverty, despite the fact that the region's oil wealth is primary in Nigeria's economy.

After the Nigerian civil war each of the country's political regions staked oil claims in the Niger Delta. In 1969 this led to a decree that gave the central government full control of the country's oil resources. The Nigerian National Oil Corporation was then set up, and in 1971 it began to regulate this centralized industry. One of the major effects of this was that the proceeds from the oil industry designated for the regional government dropped from 20 percent, in 1975, to 3 percent, in 1993.

These changes in the distribution of oil profits led to demands for local autonomy in the Niger Delta. This was especially true among the region's smaller ethnic groups. Previously, the Ijo and Ogoni, like other kinship groups, were linked primarily by family, language, and culture. In response to the region's continued poverty and the loss of oil revenues, however, they became solidified ethnic groups with increasingly nationalistic feelings.

There are many reasons for the hostility between the delta region's ethnic groups and the government. These range from the lowering of the oil revenues received by the local communities to the lack of inclusion of delta leadership in decisions about the oil industry, and from the high poverty of the region to the lack of environmental safeguards. None of these causes is greater, however, than the lack of recognition of local identity. In their struggle for recognition, minority ethnic groups such as the Ijo and the Ogoni find themselves too few in number to wage an all-out war. But they find that they can successfully wage a battle of attrition, forcing shutdowns in oil production and taking a high cost in terms of investment and lives. In 2006, rebels began to attack oil facilities and pipelines and kidnap foreigners, demanding a larger share of the region's oil wealth. A cease fire agreement in 2009 restored relative calm to the region, although tensions remain high.

Religious Divisions

Historically, northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, and the south is predominantly Christian and/or animist. The long periods of military rule that marked independent Nigeria prevented the political rise of Islamic fundamentalism, even though those governments have been dominated by northerners. Ironically, the movements toward democracy and federalism have had the opposite effect, primarily because democracy brings with it freedom of religion and federalism usually gives regional governments the right to exercise their own legislative desires. As a result, sharia, or Islamic law, has been rising as a state-level form of governance in Nigeria. The process began, in 1999, when one of Nigeria's northern states, Zamfara, adopted sharia. Soon other northern states followed suit. Although the drive to institute sharia drew hundreds of thousands of supporters to the streets in Zamfara, the move was not always greeted so enthusiastically. When the issue was raised in Kaduna state, in February 2000, as many as 400 people died in the public disturbances that followed.

Convinced that letting local governments rule by sharia would erode the democratic gains Nigeria had made, in July 2000 Obasanjo decreed that local governments did not have the right to govern by sharia. Governors countered that if sharia is the expressed will of the people, then denying it is anti-democratic. In the name of national stability Obasanjo looked the other way as state after state adopted sharia. By 2003 12 northern states—fully one-third of Nigeria—had adopted sharia. In 2009, a militant Islamist group called Boko Haram, based in northeastern Nigeria, began a violent campaign to impose sharia on the country. In 2013 the government declared a state of emergency in the three northeastern states that form the basis for Boko Haram and it has since fought a bloody battle that has claimed thousands of lives.

Other Challenges

Nigeria's political challenges are not limited to ethnic rivalry and religion, however. At the national level, corruption still abounds, human rights are regularly abused, and the economy shows little improvement. Indeed, according to Transparency International, Nigeria consistently ranks among the 10 most corrupt countries in the world. In fact, according to many observers, corruption is actually worse now than it was when Abacha was in power. Likewise, even though elections have increased the level of political rights, civil liberties continue to be eroded. Freedom House, a leading non-government organization measuring levels of democratic freedom, indicates that civil liberties continually declined from 1999 to 2013.

Regionally based ethnic and religious divides are the greatest problem Nigeria faces in terms of political stability. The economic divide between rich and poor, however, is the key issue Nigeria faces in terms of development. The country's economy is split into a modern, industrial oil economy and a subsistence agriculture economy. Oil accounts for more than 75 percent of the national economy and nearly 95 percent of the export economy. The government has taken measures in recent years to implement economic reforms, including a more equitable distribution of oil income, and the economy has improved, showing significant growth between 2007 and 2013. Gross domestic product per capita, measured in purchasing power parity, rose to \$2,300 in 2013 from \$1,583 in 2004. Still, considering Nigeria's huge oil revenues—approximately \$18 billion each year—oil does little to improve the economic standing of the Nigerian people. To complicate matters further, even as oil has continued to be exploited, the quality of Nigeria's education and health care has declined. Meanwhile, a high rate of inflation has degraded even the limited buying power of the average Nigerian. The country's oil is scarcely even used domestically and accounts for less than 13 percent of energy consumption.

Outside of the oil sector, natural gas, coal, tin, columbite, limestone, iron ore, lead, zinc, gypsum, barite, and kaolin are mined. Food products are manufactured, but poor soil in most areas limits the extent to which Nigeria's crops can be diversified. Cocoa remains the only major agricultural export. Cassava and yams, which are grown mostly for household consumption, dominate family farm production.

Further Information

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